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**NOAA FISHERIES RESPONDS TO COURT CONCERNS REGARDING
PROTECTION MEASURES FOR ENDANGERED STELLER SEA LIONS**
Action will keep Alaska pollock fishermen fishing

The National Marine Fisheries Service has addressed all requirements of a federal court order to clarify its plans to protect dwindling Steller sea lion populations while also allowing the \$670 million pollock fishery to continue, the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced today.

"We have strengthened our protections for Steller sea lions as we addressed the court's concerns, and the result is good news for this endangered species and for fishermen," said Penny Dalton, director of the National Marine Fisheries Service. "There has been concern with the competition for pollock between Stellers and fishermen, and today's protection measures further reduce the potential for competition for pollock without requiring a reduction in the catch quota."

NOAA Fisheries is implementing three comprehensive management strategies designed to reduce potential competition between Steller sea lions and the pollock fishery. They include: dispersing the fisheries over time (stretching them out); dispersing them over space (extending their size); and better protecting Stellers around rookeries and major haulouts.

"We understand that this may be an inconvenience to those who fish in these fisheries," Dalton added. "However, we feel confident that we have found a middle-ground solution that will protect Steller sea lions while ensuring the viability of the pollock fisheries."

As part of its response to the court, NOAA Fisheries identified several modifications designed to protect Steller sea lions and meet fishing needs of industry. During its review of existing and new data, scientists were able to create more flexible

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fishing seasons that will allow fishermen more latitude to produce an efficient, high quality harvest while reducing their impact on Stellers. Scientists and industry also documented the dispersal of factory trawler fishing activities as a result of the American Fisheries Act, which had put an end to a significant portion of the “race for fish” fishery in the Bering Sea. This has reduced fishing competition between fishermen and Steller sea lions outside of rookery areas. The American Fisheries Act will also improve the dispersion of fishing within the Bering Sea inshore fleet beginning in 2000.

In the Gulf of Alaska, scientists were able to allow fishing near five rookeries or haulouts on a limited basis. Small vessels without the fishing capacity to pose a threat to Stellers foraging for pollock will be allowed to fish near one site. An experimental fishery will be developed for two other rookeries or haulouts to determine how effective the overall management approach is. Two other rookeries or haulouts are within the jurisdiction of the State of Alaska and the state is developing management measures with federal cooperation.

In December 1998 NOAA Fisheries issued a Biological Opinion that concluded that the pollock fisheries of the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands areas were likely to jeopardize the endangered western population of Steller sea lions, and destroy or adversely modify their critical habitat. NOAA Fisheries implemented many of the recommendations made by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, following extensive input from the public and industry, to protect the sea lions. In July 1999 the court found that the protection measures implemented were not adequately explained by NOAA Fisheries and required the agency to more clearly identify how the protection measures fulfill the legal requirements of the Endangered Species Act. The document submitted to the court today accomplishes the judge’s order, according to NOAA Fisheries managers.

Agency scientists reiterate that the Alaskan pollock fisheries are not overfished. Fishermen harvest only 18 percent of the available pollock from the stock each year. The problem is the increasing proportion harvested from sea lion critical habitat. In recent years, a large fraction of the annual pollock catch has been harvested in critical habitat areas. NOAA Fisheries scientists question whether pollock are sufficiently available for sea lions in critical areas during times of the year important for sea lion survival. Fewer young Steller sea lions are surviving to become adults to reverse the population’s decline.

The pollock fisheries in Alaskan waters are some of the nation’s largest and most important fisheries. The regions where these fisheries are conducted are some of the most productive marine environments on Earth. These pollock fisheries are crucial to the economic well-being of many Alaskan communities.

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NOTE: The Executive Summary, the revised RPAs (reasonable and prudent alternatives), fact sheet, and accompanying maps will be available on the Internet at:
http://www.nmfs.gov/prot_res/main/new.html